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ABSTRACT

The concept of student success is open to many interpretations and assumptions. Although teachers strive for student success, success is a relative term, contingent upon the situation in which it arises. Generally, success is judged by prior conceptions and criteria; yet attribution of success can depend on the vantage point of the judge. A student with a "B" grade point average may be considered successful in comparison with peers, but unsuccessful in comparison with previous performance or that of a sibling. A standard interpretation of success is salary and job status, but a more valuable concept is an individually determined match of a desired process and result with the actual process and result. Teachers can view student success in two ways: (1) success in the role of student; and (2) success of individuals who are students. Students who achieve the school's or teacher's goals can be described as successful students. However, if teachers broaden the definition of "student" from a restrictive nominative role to persons whom they contact and influence, the concept of student success takes on a more individualized, ambiguous meaning. Teachers should be aware of their standards for success, whether they are societally, systemically, or personally determined. (FG)

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I suppose it might be said that we are here today because we are all in "quest of student success." I intend in this paper to wonder aloud whether or not that is accurate. I do not mean to imply that there are those among us who advocate student failure, or who do not seek what is good for their students. However, I do hope to make the point that the concept of "student success," taken out of specific context, is subject to so many interpretations as to make it, at best, ambiguous and, at worse, meaningless.

That the concept is subject to multiple interpretations may, I suppose, actually be a strength in the narrow context of its use as the theme of this Colloquium. In a conference which solicits a broad range of educational discourse, a theme which allows wide berth in choice of topic is appropriate. However, the (arguable) aptness of the concept in this specific usage may obscure the ambiguity inherent in the concept itself. I think there is some general sense that we all understand what student success is, and that we are simply exploring how to encourage it. Such an assumption can be quite problematic when seeking consensus about, and integration of, the various components of educational theory -- or when making public policy decisions regarding education. Why this is so is the primary focus of this paper.

I offer here a philosophical analysis of the term "student success". I will show that success is itself always a relative term, relative to some other, prior picture of the end or the process of an endeavor. Further, I will discuss the varying ways in which student might modify or qualify the content of success, focusing specifically on the difference between 1) success in the role of student, and 2) success of persons who are our students.

I have no intention of offering here the "true meaning" of student success. If there is, in any sense, a "true meaning", it is the one which we are jointly working out here today. I simply plan to demonstrate that there are multiple interpretations of student success -- and that if we are to discuss and argue about it intelligibly, we need to be sensitive to possible misinterpretation and ambiguity, as well as to our own assumptions about the meaning of the term.

As the previous comments may indicate, I do have a secondary purpose in presenting this paper, i.e. to demonstrate concretely one way in which philosophers of education may assist educational researchers, practitioners and decision-makers in achieving, if not consensus, at least understanding about the problems which we face and the decisions which we must make. The exposure of ambiguity, the clarification of terminology, and the identification of common and diverse strands of argument is one clear contribution of philosophy to educational discourse.

I

Before turning to an analysis of the term "success" as it is used in ordinary language, and before examining the ways in which it may be qualified by the modifier "student", I think it worthwhile to take a brief look at the use of the phrase "In Quest of Student Success" by the Colloquium Committee. I quote here the Colloquium Announcement: "We are defining success as a holistic process which includes cognitive and affective learning in preschool through adult education. The theme, then, includes such areas as academic and vocational education, teacher and student accountability, social, moral and physical development, testing, exceptional learners, providing for the handicapped, integration, and achievement."

Selection of this theme and the wording of the announcement by the Colloquium Committee suggests that much, if not most, educational research

could find some space under the umbrella of student success. There is the further suggestion that good educational research and practice is, in fact, in quest of student success. Yet I can imagine numerous situations in which student success is, in some sense, problematic.

Allow me to illustrate. A student recently described to me a situation involving his sister and a regional mathematics competition. The young man's sister, an excellent math student, sat for the regional competitive examination along with a friend. The friend informed her after the test that she had cheated on the exam. When results were announced, the young man's sister had not advanced to state competition but her friend, who had cheated, had done well enough to move on. The young man's sister had failed; the friend was successful. Or was she? If this is a case of student success, then I, and I suspect many of you, am not in quest of student success.

I think I can anticipate your response here. You can say that the cheater was not really successful in demonstrating her math skills, and that the non-cheater was at least somehow successful in that she tried to demonstrate her own ability. While I am sympathetic to this kind of response, I am afraid it just won't work. The cheater was successful, both at cheating and at scoring well on the test. The non-cheater may well have made a valiant attempt, but it is telling to note that attempt (as well as failure) is an antonym of success as listed in Webster's Dictionary. To try, according to the dictionary, is to not succeed.

What we need to determine is what kinds of cases we are in quest of when we are "In Quest of Student Success." Is success solely a product as most dictionary definitions seem to suggest? Is it solely a process as the Colloquium Committee defines it? Is success an important value as the

Colloquium theme seems to imply? Is it simply one value among many as my cheating example might suggest? Perhaps most important of all, how are we able to identify cases of student success? The point here is that the meaning of student success and the value which we place on it is highly contingent upon the specific situation in which it is identified. This will be developed further on. For now, I would like to ask if we are justified, then, in accepting "In Quest of Student Success" as the theme of this conference? We may more easily answer YES to this question if we are fully aware that "In Quest of Student Success" functions here as a slogan.[1] That is, it is a kind of summary statement which prescribes a certain orientation. In effect, it says nothing more than that we are "in quest of whatever our goal is in education." It is used here in a ceremonial context[2] to "express and foster a community of spirit,"[3] i.e. to arouse interest both in our work as educators and in our discussions here today.

Because it is used as a slogan, we can't criticize it for formal inadequacy and inaccuracy. We can't complain that it does not clearly specify student success or point to the existence of specific goals in education. If "In Quest of Student Success" is effective in generating interest in and substantial research for this conference, then we are justified in using it as the theme of this conference. However, this says nothing at all about the meaning of student success as a concept which figures substantively in specific instances of educational discourse (such as the papers presented here today.) The Colloquium Committee selected "Student Success" as the theme of this conference not merely because it sounded good but because it was thought to have enough common core of meaning[4] to be able to arouse interest. Specifying what that common core of meaning _is_ is not the Committee's task. Their task was to get us here. Our collective task is, on some sense, to "interpret" student success by fleshing it out in terms of specific research projects.

My specific task here is to take student success and analyze both how we commonly use the term and how we are logically warranted to use it.

II

I wish to make the point that success is always a relative term, radically contingent upon the situation in which it arises. Generally, whether or not a particular instance is identified as success depends upon some priorly-held conception of what (process or product) would constitute success. However, it is important to note that this priorly-held conception need not be absolute. The preconception of success may alter as the situation unfolds. Still, built into any pronouncement of "success" is some quite specific conception of what success is in those circumstances.

Some everyday examples demonstrate this nicely. Consider three basketball teams A, B, and C. Team A's final record is 20-0; team B's record is 10-10; and team C's record is 0-20. It is quite possible to conceive of circumstances in which each of these teams might be said to be successful.

Clearly team A is successful because it won all its games. Its success is relative to some objective standard of winning all games. Team B is successful if its prior best record was 5-15. Its success is measured in improvement relative to subjective standards. Team C is successful if this is the first year that the team existed, the members progressed, nobody was injured, and the experience was generally a positive one. Its success is relative to some prior conception of the process involved.

Attribution of success is often dependent upon the vantage point of the judge. A student with a B average may consider himself to be successful in that his average is higher than those of his peers. His teacher may view him as unsuccessful in comparison to the previous performance of his brother. His parent may judge him to be successful in light of emotional stress at home

which distracts him from his school work. His counselor may think him to be unsuccessful when viewing his actual achievement in terms of his potential.

The point is not that some of these success attributions are incorrect. It is that whenever one uses the term success, one has in mind some preconception of what success is in that instance. If we are to understand another's reference to success, we must be sure that we are also clear about his criteria of success. We cannot speak intelligibly to one another about student success unless we a) hold identical criteria for success, or b) at least understand the differences between us. Therefore, if someone (e.g. the someones presenting papers at this conference today) refers to student success, we must ask them what their criteria for such success are. This is a simple point, but one which we are inclined to forget.

The reason why we forget is not difficult to discern. There is a "standard interpretation" of success in our society, an interpretation about which there is some degree of implicit consensus. ("Success" functions as a sort of societal slogan.) The standard interpretation is based on our conception of our socio-political system as meritocratic, a conception firmly rooted in the Protestant Ethic. People believe that they are rewarded on the basis of merit. There is a general faith that one's status is not fixed, one's opportunity is not limited and one's success is not accidental. In this interpretation, success is measured objectively in terms of salary and status. The educational equivalents of objective measures of success include grades, athletic competition, selection for honors courses, etc. Education exists not for itself, but as a means of success. According to this standard interpretation, Team A above is the only successful team because, as Vince Lombardi put it, winning is "the only thing." And according to this standard interpretation, the "B" student is unsuccessful for the plain and simple reason that his average is less than "A".

Whether the standard interpretation of success is the best one is an important issue for discussion. There is, in fact, considerable ambivalence within our society toward such a notion of success. The members of the Colloquium Committee showed awareness of this when they talked about success as a process. William James referred to "worship of that bitch-goddess Success" as the cause of moral flabbiness,[5] implying that the standard interpretation was problematic. Albert Einstein exhorted a friend: "Try not to become a man of success, but try rather to become a man of value,"[6] suggesting that success is contradictory to important values. However, my intention is not to debate the standard interpretation of success, but rather to point out that it is one of many possible interpretations of success. It is quite possible to interpret success such that being a man of success is being a man of value, for instance. It is not the standard interpretation, but it is like the standard interpretation in that it is based on some specific view of the situation and some prior conception of what is desirable. The key is to remember that the standard interpretation is not dictated by the meaning of the term success. Rather, the interpretation adopted is what gives meaning to the term.

In short, a person is successful when an actual process/result matches a desired process/result, whether that process/result is societally-dictated (external standards) or individually-determined (internal standards). There remains, then, another variable, i.e. the perspective of the "judge." The "judge" is the person making the attribution of success, the one who determines not just whether the actual matches the desirable, but who, more importantly, determines what the desirable is. Who is to be the judge is the central issue when the notion of success is qualified by the term student. It is to this issue that I now turn.

III

There are, I think, two primary ways in which we can read "student success". We can take it to mean 1) success in the role of student, or 2) success of the persons who are our students. The two are possibly, though not necessarily, contradictory. I will explain each and discuss implications.

If, by student success, we mean success in the role of student, then we must determine just what are the parameters of the role of student. In other words, what are the criteria of a successful representation of this role? Once again, we are faced with various possible interpretations.

There is, I think, a sort of standard interpretation, one which fits loosely the standard interpretation of success described previously, and which is, like the standard interpretation of success, implicitly assumed rather than explicitly justified.

The role of the student is to work hard to learn what the schools have to teach. The successful student is most often the one who earns an "A" average, is elected President of Student Council, and/or is captain of the soccer team. These are the students who are generally given awards and rewards certifying them as successful. In addition, however, recognition is sometimes given to those who demonstrate exceptional effort; e.g. a student may be rewarded for perfect attendance, persistent effort, or a sportsmanlike attitude. Still, the interpretation of the role of student is the same; work hard to learn what the schools have to teach. The school, in the person of the teacher, is the arbiter of success.

This standard interpretation of the role of student is in direct contradiction, of course, with the radical and/or revisionist critique of education. Actually, the description of the role of the student is remarkably similar. In Jerry Farber's idiom, the student is a "nigger," one who jumps when the

teacher says "jump," reads what the teacher tells him to read, and believes what the teacher says is the truth.[7] The conflict is over whether an adequate representation of this role constitutes success in any meaningful way.

Recent revisionist literature makes exactly this point. In this view, the widely-accepted role of the student is to become socialized into the values, the work place and the status structure of the society. The "successful student" is the one who adopts socially-accepted values, who acquires skills which are utilizable in our industrial society, and who accepts his status as a fair indicator of his personal worth. For the revisionist, success, as designated here, is not a value; it is not desirable. In short, if this is student success, then educators should not be in quest of student success.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner offer an alternative interpretation of the role of student in The Soft Revolution: A Student Handbook for Turning Schools Around.[8] While sharing the radical critique of the educational system, Postman and Weingartner view the student as a potential agent for change rather than as an unwitting victim of the system. The role of the student is to realize that the "students are the schools" and to take (non-violent) action to make the schools more responsive. Therefore, the successful student is the one who effectively changes the system (toward humanistic goals and practices), and not the student who scores highest on achievement tests.

This notion of the successful student as revolutionary (even a "soft" revolutionary) is enough to give many teachers apoplexy. I should point out here that there are ideas about the role of the student which differ from both the standard interpretation and from the radical critique. We might, for example, base a conception of the role of student on R.S. Peters' analysis of education.[9] According to Peters, education is a term which sets out broad

criteria for a process in which a student is a participant. Education a) involves content which is worthwhile, b) engenders knowledge and understanding in "cognitive perspective," c) is characterized by "leading out" rather than "putting in," and d) must be consistent with respect for persons. The role of the student, then, is simply to be a willing participant in this somewhat open-ended process. In this interpretation, student success is less a function of socially-designated goals than of educationally-based processes. It is this sort of interpretation which I suspect many of us, as students of education, have vaguely in mind.

All of the above interpretations of student success are based on the successful representation of a peculiar conception of the role of the student. There is, however, an altogether different way of construing student success, i.e. success of the persons who are our students. In this way of thinking, "student" is not a normative role, but an adjective descriptive of persons with whom we, as educators, come into contact. We are concerned with the success of these individual persons as individuals in a broad context, not only as students. This view suggests that our quest for student success is, in part, an acknowledgement of Christopher Morley's point when he said, "There is only one success -- to be able to spend your life in your own way."[10]

I would like to cite just one example of an individual's conception of success which goes beyond, and in some sense, contradicts the standard interpretation of success associated with her particular role. A recent article in Parade Magazine reports "What Success Taught Sissy Spacek."[11] Spacek, according to the article, is "the most successful of the new generation of American actresses." In other words, she is successful in the role of an actress; she has performed starring roles and won an Oscar. However, the article goes on:

> But success, real success, is a state of mind more than anything else, a quality of self-esteem. Sissy Spaček knows that now, but it was knowledge hard achieved. . . . Oh yes, she considers herself successful -- precisely because she does not think of things any more in terms of success.[12]

The above statement would be odd-sounding if we did not keep in mind the distinction between personal standards of success ("she considers herself successful") and role-related standards of success ("she does not think of things anymore in terms of success"). Similarly, we must remain aware of the potential distinction between a student's personal conception of his success and the role-determined conception of student success. Both are possible readings of "student success."

Two points should be noted. First, it is quite possible that "student" and "individual" be construed in such a manner that the two are complementary and compatible. However, it often seems true (as revisionist critics and existential commentators point out) that the societally-designated role of the student may severely limit the personally-generated desires and talents of the individual.

Second, even if we do agree that there is a difference between success of students as persons and success of students as students, we still must deal with the general interpretation of success, and the issue of who is to judge. Are we talking about society's determinination of what a successful person is, or are we talking about each individual's decision as to what his personal interpretation of success will be? And if we choose the latter, are we appropriately sensitive to the ways in which personal choices and perceptions are limited, supported, and/or distorted by the social milieu in which they occur? Like success as student, success as person allows for varying interpretation.

IV

It would seem, from this analysis, that the concept of student success is something of a built-in multiple-choice quiz. If I am correct in maintaining that the meaning of success is always relative to some accepted standard(s), then we must ask ourselves some questions about the source, strength and nature of that standard before we can proceed to discuss any instance of student success intelligibly.

Naturally, we need to know just what the standard is. But we also need to know whether the standard is a societal one, a systematic one, or a personal one. We need to know whether the standard embodies a product, a process, or in some way, both. We need to know who is making the judgment of success. Who is accepting the standard as desirable and assessing some student's experience in light of that standard? Is it society? the teacher as representative of the educational system? the individual student? Without such awareness, i.e. without specification of the contingent circumstances which designate that situation a case of student success, the concept of student success is at least ambiguous.

Are we all in quest of student success? As the central slogan for this Colloquium, the phrase "student success" means nothing more than "whatever our goal is in education" or perhaps "something good for our students." If that is all we take it to mean, then it is obviously true, but trivial, that we are all in quest of student success. If, however, each of us has in mind a concept of student success with quite specific content, then to say that we are all in quest of student success is not at all a trivial statement. Unfortunately, until it is clear that we agree upon explicit standards for student success, it is also not obviously true.

FOOTNOTES

[1] For the seminal discussion of educational slogans, cf. Israel Scheffler, The Language of Education, (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1960).

[2] Cf. B. Paul Komisar and James McClellan, "The Logic of Slogans," in Language and Concepts in Education, ed. by B. Othanel Smith and Robert H. Ennis, (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1961), pp. 195-214.

[3] Schaffer, p. 37.

[4] Komisar and McClellan point out that a slogan develops a "standard interpretation" when others accede to or accept a particular meaning, cf., p. 203ff.

[5] William James, in a letter to H.G. Wells, 1906.

[6] Albert Einstein, quoted in personal memoir of William Miller, Life, May 2, 1955, p. 64. The remainder of the quote reads "...He is considered successful in our day who gets more out of life than he puts in. But a man of value will give more than he receives."

[7] Jerry Farber, "The Student as Nigger," Los Angeles Free Press, 1969.

[8] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, The Soft Revolution, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971).

[9] R.S. Peters, Ethics and Education, (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1966).

[10] Christopher Morley, Where the Blue Begins, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1922).

[11] Michael Ver Meulen, "What Success Taught Sissy Spacek," Parade Magazine, March 14, 1982, p. 16.

[12] Ver Meulen, p. 16.